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ABSTRACT

A group of 40 parents were brought into the laboratory with two of their children (one preschool-age, one toddler) and given a cognitive task which competed with child care for their attention. This competing cognitive activity had substantial effects on parental behavior compared to a control phase with no competing task. In general, positive parental behaviors such as interaction, responsiveness, support, and stimulation were withdrawn from the preschool-age children when the parents had a competing activity, while negative behaviors such as interference and criticism/punishment were increased toward the toddlers. The parents also actively generated various strategies to deal with the conflict, such as suggesting new activities and delegating child care responsibility to the older children. (Author)

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Situational Determinants of Parental Behavior: Effects of Competing Cognitive Activity*

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I have a friend who, like many people nowadays, is very adept at tracing his neuroticisms back to his parents. According to him his free-floating guilt, his sexual anxiety, his timidity at work are all manifestations of his early relationships with his mother and father. Recently he came to me with somewhat of a revelation. "I just realized," he told me, "that whatever problems I could blame on my parents, they could blame on their parents."

I believe that this story aptly expresses the state of our knowledge about parental behavior. We have been very diligent about investigating the effects of parental practices on child development. But research has been less definitive on the determinants of child-rearing practices, the factors which influence the selection and use of socialization techniques by parents. Much of the work on the determinants of parental behavior has explored the relationships between demographic variables and parenting. For example, social class differences in parenting are among the strongest and best-replicated effects in the whole socialization field. Middle-class parents tend to be more attentive and responsive to their children; they are less coercive, using more psychological discipline and less power assertion than lower-class parents (Brody, 1968; Bronfenbrenner, 1958; Gildea, Glidewell, & Kantor, 1961; Miller & Swanson, 1960; Minton, Kagan, & Levine, 1971; Sears, Maccoby, & Levin, 1957; Streissguth & Bee, 1972; Tulkin &

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Kagan, 1972; Walters, Connor, & Zunich, 1964; Zussman, 1975). Other demographic variables that seem to relate to parental behavior include family size, ordinal position, and sex of child (see Zussman, 1977, for a review of this literature). But this body of research is more intriguing than conclusive. Demographic factors are largely "basket" variables within which the dimensions that actually influence the parent are hidden. The processes underlying these relationships have not yet been satisfactorily explained.

Several areas of the literature have touched more closely on possible long-term processes. Socialization techniques have long been thought to flow from parental personality organization, or from modeling influences of the parent's own parents. But the prediction of child rearing behavior from parental personality and background has generally been weak (Bronson, Katten, & Livson, 1959; Gelso, 1974; Hoffman, 1963; Woods, Glavin, & Kettle, 1960; Waxler & Mishler, 1971a, 1971b). Comparative, ethological, and sociobiological literature suggest a biological component to human parenting. Hormones seem to be related to caretaking behavior in some species although they are not essential; adult organisms of a range of species seem to be "wired" to respond nurturantly to certain eliciting characteristics of infants (Bowlby, 1969; Harper, 1971; Moltz, Lubin, Leon, & Numan, 1970; Rosenberg, Denenberg, Zarrow, & Frank, 1971; Rosenblatt, 1969). Cross-cultural and sociological investigators have accumulated a literature on the influence of sociocultural factors on parenting techniques. For example, extended family structures seem to foster greater maternal warmth, more punitive aggression training, and greater sex-stereotyping (Barry, Bacon, & Child, 1957; Minturn & Lambert, 1964). Finally, a largely interventional literature documents the fact that parents learn

child-rearing skills by direct tuition (Andrews, Blumenthal, Bache, & Wiener, 1975; Bronfenbrenner, 1958, 1975; Goodson & Hess, 1975; Gordon, 1970; Levenstein, 1975; Patterson, 1976; Schaeffer, 1972).

This body of research begins to illuminate the processes involved in the determination of parental behavior, but nature and nurture alone are not sufficient for a thorough understanding of parenting. By now we should have developed a healthy respect for the power of situational influences on all kinds of behavior, including parenting. We can distinguish two types of situational processes. Dyadic aspects of the situation refer to the parent's input stimulation from the child. A growing literature (which I won't try to review here) documents how characteristics and behavior of the child may systematically influence parental attitudes and behavior. Contextual aspects of the situation are events which occur outside the parent-child dyad. These are elements of the setting which influence the parent's sense of control, affect, involvement in the parental role, and demands on attention. Research investigating the influence of the contextual situation on the parent has been scarce; it is largely naturalistic and thus lacks the control needed to identify causal forces.

The study on which I report today focused on one dimension of the contextual situation, competing cognitive activity, and its effects on the parent. That is, I was interested in what happens to socialization when parents have a mental task which competes with child care for their attention, one of the most common situational events in the parental ecology. I advanced two major hypotheses about the parent who is in conflict between child care and a competing task. First, since the parent is motivated to reduce the effort of parenting, I hypothesized that cognitive distraction would result in decreased parental interaction, responsiveness, support, and

stimulation. Second, since power assertion is often perceived as the discipline method which yields the most immediate compliance with the least parental effort, I expected that parents with a competing task would be more authoritarian and directive toward their children. I was also interested in investigating the strategies that parents might develop to deal with competing activity.

To test these hypotheses, 40 parents (half of them mothers, half fathers) were brought into a free-play situation in the laboratory for a single session with two of their children, one of preschool age, one a toddler. The laboratory room was furnished with several attractive nuisances to maximize the level and range of parent-child interaction. I chose a mental anagram task as the competing cognitive activity for the parent. The parents served as their own controls; that is, each parent went through a 10-minute Task Phase, in which he/she was asked to work on the anagrams, and a 10-minute No Task Phase. Parent and child behaviors were recorded by observers who were blind to the order of phases, which was randomly counterbalanced in the design.

Analysis of the data showed that the competing task had substantial effects on parental behavior toward the children. The competing activity not only affected the quantity of parent-child interaction, but also produced qualitative shifts in the nature of the interaction that did occur (controlling, where appropriate, for the different levels of interaction in the two phases). Table 1 shows selected categories and indices of parental behavior. Although the results were consistent with the major hypotheses, the effects on the parent were interestingly divided between the two children involved in the session. In general, the hypothesized decrease in positive behaviors such as interaction, responsiveness, support, and stimu-

lation during the parental overload phase was confirmed only with the older (preschool-age) children. The first entry in the table shows means for parent-child interaction time in each phase. Parents interacted with older children an average of 5.4 minutes in the No Task Phase, 3.8 minutes in the Task Phase, a difference that was significant at the .001 level. The effect of phase on parental interaction time with the younger children (toddlers) did not approach significance. Positive parental responsiveness to bids by older children averaged .77 in the No Task Phase but only .69 when the parents had a competing task to perform ($p < .05$). Again there were no differences in behavior toward the younger children. A similar picture emerged when we considered parental supportive behaviors like praise ($p < .01$ with older children). Cognitive stimulation by the parent also showed this pattern. The category teaching denotes direct stimulation, i.e. information-giving ($p < .05$ with older children), while structurizing denotes indirect stimulation, in which the parent encourages and leads the child to obtain the information on his/her own ($p < .01$ with older children). Both types of stimulation were reduced toward the preschoolers in the Task Phase, but not significantly toward the toddlers.

Insert Table 1 about here

The hypothesized increase in authoritarian, directive behavior in the Task Phase also received support. The observers were asked to rate the parents on how curt and abrupt they were with both children in each phase. Table 1 shows that the parents were rated much more curt when the competing task was present than when it was not ($p < .0001$). But the behavior counts confirmed this effect only with the younger children. The parents directed

more interference ($p < .05$) and criticism/punishment ($p < .05$) toward the toddlers in the Task Phase than in the No Task Phase. No significant differences in these negative behaviors were found with the preschool-age children.

The parents actively generated various strategies to deal with the competing activity, which were again specific to the ages of the children. With the older children, one parental strategy was suggesting new activities in an attempt to keep the child occupied and undemanding ($p < .10$ when interaction level was controlled). This strategy is common in everyday interaction, but it's not always easy and parents are often called upon to do it creatively. For example, in a home in which I observed recently, a three-year-old girl and her mother were playing with dolls, feeding them an imaginary lunch. The child had decided that they were cooking pizzas. The mother went to the laundry room to check on, and take out, the wash load. The child followed, volunteering help and obviously wanting to stay near the mother. But the mother, who wished to be free of the child's "help," said, "Oh, the pizza's burning. You'd better go check it." The child denied it: "No it's not." But the mother persisted: "Yes it is, I can smell it." This sent the child running back to rescue the imaginary meal from the imaginary oven, leaving the mother in peace.

Another strategy which parents used with older children was what we called "passing the buck"--delegating to the older child responsibility for caring for the younger child ($p < .05$). Neither of these strategies was found in parental behavior toward the toddlers. In fact, parents were <u>less</u> likely to suggest new activities to the toddlers during the Task Phase ($p < .01$). This is puzzling; possibly the parents expected that they would have to supervise any new activities that the toddlers selected.

The image that emerges from these data is consistent with a phenomenological view of situational influence on parental behavior, on which the hypotheses were based. Parents are, indeed, buffeted about by competing activity. They resort to a level of behavior which might be called "minimal parenting." At this level of parenting, positive behaviors such as general interaction, responsiveness, support, and cognitive stimulation are regarded as expendable and are curtailed when parental load limits are reached. The parent must still exert some control over the child, however, and negative behaviors such as interference and criticism/punishment may be increased in minimal parenting because they are seen as methods of obtaining rapid compliance. But parents also actively choose some of the directions in which they are buffeted, and act to minimize and channel the effects. Parents in this study accomplished this, as we expected, by generating strategies to deal with the conflict. What we didn't expect was that the parents would withdraw positive behaviors only from the older children, and would increase negative behaviors only toward the younger children. Parents seemed to actively select the "victims" of the different types of effects. This may stem from the differing behaviors, needs, and resources of children of the two ages. Toddlers may not be receptive to much cognitive stimulation, for example, and since parents do not give them much under normal conditions they cannot substantially reduce stimulation under a competing task. Ordinal position of the children may also play a part in accounting for these differences.

The results clearly demonstrate that parenting is under systematic situational control, and suggest that we should pay close attention to situational factors in studying or attempting to enhance parenting. But many questions remain unanswered. In our research we are currently taking

the study of competing activity into the field to evaluate whether parents in the real world react to competing tasks in the same way they do in the lab. We are also extending our laboratory investigations to explore other aspects of the contextual situation and their effects on parents. Certainly parental behavior is multiply determined; but eventually, when people blame their problems--or their virtues--on their parents, we may have a fair understanding of what factors are really to blame.

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Footnote

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Table 1

Effects of Phase on Selected Parental Behaviors

Parental Behavior	Directed Toward	Phase Mean No Task	Phase Mean Task	Mean Difference
Interaction time (minutes)	Older children	5.4	3.8	1.6***
	Younger children	4.1	3.5	0.6
Positive responsiveness to bids (ratio)	Older children	0.77	0.69	0.08*
	Younger children	0.68	0.68	0.00
Praise	Older children	1.68	0.50	1.18**
	Younger children	0.98	0.48	0.50+
Teaching	Older children	5.50	3.23	2.27*
	Younger children	2.70	2.05	0.65+
Structurizing	Older children	3.28	1.33	1.95**
	Younger children	1.48	0.90	0.58
Curtness rating (scale points)	Both children	3.33	5.15	-1.82***
Interference	Older children	1.68	1.28	0.40
	Younger children	2.03	3.38	-1.35*
Criticism/punishment (parents using)	Older children	2	4	-2
	Younger children	3	8	-5*
Suggests new activity	Older children	1.38	1.68	-0.30
	Younger children	2.65	1.10	1.55***
Passes buck	Older children	0.05	0.30	-0.25*
	Younger children	0.03	0.03	0.00

Note. All means are raw scores although analyses were often based on transformed or ranked data. Units are number of 6-second intervals except as specified under Parental Behavior.

+$p < .10$.

*$p < .05$.

**$p < .01$.

***$p < .001$.